Mycenaeans on the Bronze-Age world stage

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The Bronze-Age Mycenaean civilization which dominated mainland Greece in the late second millennium B.C. *also had connections with the other great powers of the period, and evidence from palace records, royal letters, and shipwrecks can help us reconstruct them.*

Mycenaean palaces, at sites such as Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos, and Thebes, were the centres of the remarkable Bronze-Age culture which flourished in mainland Greece in the 14th and 13th centuries B.C. We know that these palaces exercised political and economic control over much of mainland Greece but how did they acquire the raw materials and products that they needed? Were the palaces actively involved in trade and did this bring them into contact with the great powers of the eastern Mediterranean, in particular the Hittites, a powerful civilization based in Anatolia, north-west Turkey, between the 17th and 13th centuries B.C., and the Egyptians?

Please send one ton of copper, three princesses, and a conjuror

Linear B texts, the records preserved on clay tablets (like the one above) found in the remains of Mycenaean palaces, and written in an early form of the Greek language, but in an early, non-alphabetical script, tell us an enormous amount about the Mycenaean economy, but, curiously, seldom mention trade. However, they do record imported raw materials and luxury items, for example gold, ivory, and spices. We also know that the palaces supervised a textile industry, which could well have produced more than was needed locally, and it seems that some of the cloth was made specifically for export. There was a perfume industry as well and this is significant because most of the Mycenaean pottery found overseas consists of vessels in which scented oils were transported.

Egyptian and Near Eastern texts tell us more about the way in which trade was conducted in the eastern Mediterranean at this time. Often this took the form of lavish presents between rulers. A letter from the Egyptian pharaoh to the king of Babylon records a consignment of gifts which included objects of gold, silver, copper, and bronze, jewellery, mirrors, thrones, perfume, cloth, stone vessels, and ebony boxes, weighed and numbered so that their value could be calculated. The expectation was that the sender would receive as much in return – failure resulted in a letter of complaint. Raw materials, such as copper, were specifically requested and shipped in bulk. Princesses, physicians, sculptors, even conjurors could find themselves transferred from one royal court to another.

Dear Hattusili – contact with the Hittites

It is clear that the Mycenaeans took part in these royal exchanges because of a letter sent by the Hittite king Hattusili III to another ruler, which mentions a gift from the king of Ahhiyawa. It is now agreed that Ahhiyawa was a Mycenaean state and therefore that the Mycenaeans and the Hittites must have come into contact with each other, although they do not appear to have enjoyed a particularly friendly relationship. In another letter a Hittite king complains about a Mycenaean warlord who had attacked one of his vassals. A later document records that the Hittites had sent an army to western Turkey to campaign against the Mycenaeans and their allies. Nevertheless, the Hittite king addresses his Mycenaean counterpart as ‘My brother, the great king, my equal’. Only a powerful ruler would be greeted in this way, which suggests that one of the mainland Greek palaces, such as Mycenae or Thebes, must have been the capital of Ahhiyawa.

Wealth on the Nile – Mycenaeans and Egypt

Let us turn from the Hittites to the Egyptians, the other great East Mediterranean power. The Amarna Letters written in the 14th century, in the reigns of the pharaohs Amenhotep III and Akhenaten, reveal the scale of the trade between Egypt and Near Eastern states. As none of these letters is addressed to a Mycenaean ruler, it has been argued that contact between Greece and Egypt must have been indirect, via Near Eastern intermediaries. However, there are six Egyptian faience plaques from Mycenae which may well have been a royal gift and could indicate an official visit by an Egyptian embassy. There is also evidence of Mycenaean trade with Egypt, particularly from el-Amarna, the city built by the pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1353–37 B.C.) as the capital of Egypt and abandoned soon after his death. In a chapel at el-Amarna, fragments of a painted papyrus with a battle scene were discovered. In one section an Egyptian is surrounded by Libyans who are about to cut his throat but a group of warriors on another set of fragments comes to his assistance. They have distinctive yellow helmets divided into panels and it is thought that these could be boar’s tusk helmets which Mycenaeans wore. If so, the warriors may have been mercenaries who fought in the Egyptian army.

The evidence from shipwrecks

A ship wrecked off Uluburun on the southern coast of Turkey around 1300 B.C. provides a perfect illustration of the type of exchange described in the Amarna Letters. Raw materials made up most of the cargo, in particular almost 500 copper ingots, which weighed around ten tons and were evidently from Cyprus. There was one ton of tin, which had presumably come from much further east, possibly Afghanistan. Stored in amphorae was one ton of resin – this may have been burned as incense. In addition 175 Egyptian glass ingots, cedar logs, elephant and hippopotamus tusks, tortoise shells and ostrich eggs were recovered from the wreck. Manufactured items included copper and bronze vessels, gold and silver jewellery and an ivory trumpet. It seems likely that this valuable cargo was a royal shipment, but from where and to whom? The mixture of finds makes it difficult to identify the home port of the ship. However, it seems likely to have been a Near Eastern vessel that had sailed via Cyprus and was headed for a mainland Greek port when it sank.

Go East – Cyprus and the Near East

As the Uluburun shipwreck shows, Cyprus was a major source of copper at this time and thousands of pieces of Mycenaean pottery have been found on sites across the island, in settlements, shrines and especially tombs. The dead were often given perfumed oil, which may have been used in the funeral cere-

mony. In richer tombs, there were also Mycenaean cups and elaborately decorated kraters in which wine and water were mixed for banquets. Some of these vessel types are quite rare in mainland Greece and it was once thought that they must have been made on Cyprus. However, analysis of the clay has demonstrated that they were imported from Greece and were evidently manufactured for the Cypriot market.

Ugarit, on the Syrian coast, was a major commercial centre. The state archives reveal the range of items – grain, wine, oil, honey, salt, resin, timber, ivory, linen and textiles – which were exported from Ugarit to Egypt, Mesopotamia, Cyprus, Turkey and Greece. Much of this trade was in the hands of independent merchants who sometimes operated in an official capacity on behalf of the state. There is plenty of Mycenaean pottery from Ugarit and other sites along the coast of Syria, Lebanon and Israel. It is exactly like the pottery found on Cyprus and this has led to the suggestion that cargoes from Greece were offloaded in Cypriot ports, divided up and then shipped on from there. So any Mycenaean merchants who had sailed as far as Cyprus would not necessarily have travelled further east.

Mycenaeans on the world stage

The Mycenaean palaces certainly benefited from and in many respects depended on overseas trade. They supported industries which manufactured items for export, in particular perfumed oil and textiles. If the cargo on the Uluburun wreck was a royal shipment headed for Greece, the recipients would clearly have been in a position to control the movement of key raw materials, and texts from Pylos do indicate that the palace carefully monitored the bronze supply. Given their vested interest in trade, Mycenaean states would presumably have tried to impose some restrictions or conditions on the merchants they employed. However, there is no mention of an official merchant class in the texts. This could be an indication that most of the ships which sailed between the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean came from Cyprus or the Near East. No doubt there were Mycenaean vessels and merchants as well but they may well have had a more restricted role than is usually supposed. Equally contact between Mycenaean rulers and their counterparts in Egypt and the Near East was probably rather sporadic. The Mycenaeans were not major players in this international world.

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